

MyPyramid, my health

A spruced-up food guide from the U.S. Department of Agriculture is more personalized, listing portion sizes for different age groups

By Jessica Ravitz
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WEST JORDAN - Alex is not so sure about soccer. He tends to wander off the field mid-play. He might flop down in a heap on the sidelines, race in circles on the wrong side of the net or make a beeline for his Kool-Aid Jammers juice pouch.

But the spry 5-year-old's mother, Sandee Eisert, is content to see her son being active - in any form. Getting him to run around on the West Jordan soccer field admittedly is easier than encouraging her boy - a fan of corn dogs and toaster waffles - to eat healthfully.

"I worry that I'm raising fast-food junkies," concedes the West Valley City mother of five, who says opting for junk over organic vegetables is usually more cost-effective for her large family. And it's certainly an easier sell.

Eisert, whose kids range in age from 8 months to 11 years, is not alone in her struggle to raise healthy children. Health officials struggle to control America's surge in obesity, notably among children, which is exacerbated by sedentary lifestyles. Heck, even Cookie Monster has been forced to undergo an eating-habit overhaul.

Enter the latest tool to promote healthy eating: MyPyramid - The U.S. Department of Agriculture's newly unveiled interactive food guidance system. It's an upgrade from the food pyramid released in 1992 that most Americans have come to know. Or, sort of know.

While 80 percent of the public recognize the old pyramid, only 3 or 4 percent of the population bothered to study the explanatory text, let alone adhere to the recommendations, says John Webster, spokesman for the USDA's center for nutrition policy and promotion.

As a result, visual messages were misconstrued. For instance, Webster says parents interpreted the layered look as a hierarchal system, thinking grains - at the base or foundation - should be eaten before vegetables. Ranges in suggested serving sizes, which were supposed to correlate with ranges in suggested calorie intake, were used without considering an eater's sex, age or activity level.

With MyPyramid, introduced last month, the USDA hopes to re-educate the masses by way of a more user-friendly tool. The Web site, <http://www.mypyramid.gov>, offers an interactive approach, where visitors type in their own stats - or those for their children - to get personalized eating plans.

It's part of a broader health campaign Utah Agriculture Commissioner Leonard Blackham supports. Other components include Farm Field Days, a program sponsored by the Utah State University Extension Service. It invites grade-

schoolers to farms such as Salt Lake County's Butterfield Farms so they can appreciate where food comes from.

"The importance is clear, and the time is right," Blackham says of the need to educate kids.

Kelly Orton, Salt Lake City School District director of child nutrition, likes the look and feel of MyPyramid. "It treats the individual instead of the group."

Orton's 10-year-old son has different needs from other children. So the individualized tips that now are available hold more weight. His boy is "skinny as a bean pole . . . going all day," Orton says. "You can't put enough food in him."

When it comes to serving up mass-produced school lunches, however, the personalized approach of MyPyramid is essentially irrelevant.

The national school lunch program is tied to strict federal nutritional rules, explains Bob Ward, director of Granite School District's school food services. Fat percentages, calories, minerals and vitamins are carefully monitored. And while MyPyramid won't affect the day-to-day workings in school cafeterias, the federal dietary guidelines - upon which the new pyramid is based - may force changes in lunch menus. These guidelines - released every five years, most recently in January 2005 - incorporate the most current research findings. Webster, of the USDA, says school meals are being examined right now.

At the same time, school districts nationwide are working to institute, by 2006, wellness policies - pursuant to federal legislation passed last summer - to improve the overall health of school environments, including a close look at the nutritional value of vending machine items and a focus on exercise.

Physical activity has been given greater emphasis with MyPyramid, too, gaining a visual nod - a place on the image - for the first time. Other changes that have been incorporated include the heightened importance placed on whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and specifically yellow, orange and dark green veggies.

The overall message is a good one, says Rachel Cox, a registered dietitian with Utah's Department of Health. She worries, however, that the health of people who don't have Internet access is being overlooked.

"It might be difficult to educate the overall public," Cox says. "I'm trying to figure out how to use it in what I'm doing."

Not to worry, says Webster of the USDA. He says the agency will create printed materials and reach out to specific organizations.

"This is just the first of what we're calling a three-year rollout," Webster explains. "We'll be going through a lot of channels to get information out to those who don't have access."

Whether MyPyramid, or subsequent efforts, will help wean young Alex off corn dogs remains to be seen. But holding his mom's hand, he ran up and down the soccer field - staying inbounds - and looked the perfect picture of 5-year-old health.

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